

The Origins and Development of Inner Relationship Focusing

by Ann Weiser Cornell PhD

When I moved to California in 1983, after assisting Gene Gendlin with Focusing workshops in Chicago for three years, I wanted to become a Focusing practitioner. I wanted to be, not a therapist, but a person who teaches Focusing in one-to-one sessions and in workshops. At the time, this was barely a profession that anyone had conceived of, but I had an inner sense of wanting to do it. It takes a while to gather enough people for workshops, so teaching Focusing through one-to-one sessions was where I started, and where I concentrated for a number of years.

(I still do more “first” Focusing sessions than anyone else I know, often two or three in a week.)

Of course I wanted to give people successful Focusing experiences, partly because I wanted that for them and partly because this is how I wanted to earn my living, and who would pay me if the sessions weren't helpful? This need – to be effective rather quickly – led to a number of new learnings for me. I can say with confidence that these generous people who came for sessions taught me much more than I taught them!

My way of approaching and teaching the Focusing process grew out of these “first” sessions. Taking someone from “no Focusing” to “Focusing” is an absorbing challenge, quite different from giving sessions to people who already know Focusing. There can't be just one method, since people start in different places. At the same time I learned that some suggestions I could make tended to work even for people who were different from each other (for example, people

who get images easily vs. people who get body sensations easily), and I began to make a collection of these generally helpful suggestions.

Guiding someone through a first Focusing session has always been a fascinating dance, a balance between meeting this unique person, creating/inventing what this person needs at this moment, and drawing on what I'd learned in the past from others who'd been helped by certain ways of saying things. I think all Focusing teachers go through this process, enriching what they can do with each person they work with. But for me, landing in California with the dream of making my living helping people learn Focusing, the first thing I had to do was “un-learn” some of what I myself had been taught. How that happened, and what I learned instead, is what this article is about.

In the research that led to the development of Focusing (Gendlin, et al., 1968), some therapy clients were naturally doing something that connected them directly with their presently-felt experiencing, and others were not. Focusing as a process was developed as a way of teaching the people who weren't natural Focusers how to do this direct connecting. I have seen this myself over the years, as a Focusing teacher, that some people will find Focusing no matter what you say to them! They are the easy ones.

Since I myself was not one of the easy ones, my passion has always been to explore ways of teaching Focusing that work for “the rest of us.” I'm convinced that Focusing is a natural birthright, that everyone has the potential to be able to do it (barring brain damage and similar barriers to natural function). The challenge is to find the way to Focusing for each person. This is in essence what my life's work has been about.

One of my goals has been to find a way of taking people through the Focusing process without explaining very much to them ahead of time. I didn't want to tell them before the session what the "steps of Focusing" were, or teach them what specialized words like "handle" or "felt sense" meant. To do that would be to engage their intellect, which I felt would be counterproductive at the beginning. It would also, in my experience, tend to raise up parts of them that doubted whether they could do this, and wondered if they were doing it right. I wanted to take them through the process without previous explanation, to let them have the experience first before they did any thinking about it. (Teaching offered in short segments during the process, as needed, didn't seem to share the drawbacks of explanations in advance.)

Perhaps the most important reason not to offer explanations in advance has been my realization that people come to Focusing from such different places, comfortable in different modalities, experienced in different previous methods, that the same explanation will not work for everyone. And we won't know until the process starts what they do need to know.

So come with me back to my session room in the years from 1983 on in California. People are sitting across from me to learn Focusing, yet they are doing all kinds of non-Focusing things, and the facilitative words I had learned to use did not help them to find Focusing. I had to come up with something more helpful. Gradually, with their feedback, I did – though this process hasn't ended, and I make no claim that I've found the most helpful suggestions for everyone.

What is interesting, though, and most relevant for this article, is that this process of learning from my students/clients what would help them find Focusing led me in a coherent direction, toward a conception of the Focusing process as an inner relationship. And that in turn led to a supportive structure that people can follow on their own, in their own Focusing and in facilitating the Focusing of others.

I'm going to discuss what I learned not in the order I learned it, but in the approximate order of a typical Focusing session, beginning, middle, "deeper middle," and end.

Leading In

I found that most people could be helped by getting into better contact with their bodies at the start of the session. (See "Body? What Body?" in this volume for some thoughts on the people who aren't helped by this.) I developed a way of starting that eventually came to be called "Leading In." I had once received a session from Joan Lavender in which she started by having me sense the periphery of my body, and I liked it so much I incorporated it in my own way of starting. (Although I didn't use the word "periphery," because on principle I try never to use words that a 12-year-old wouldn't know.)

This was quite a development, because what we had been doing before this was saying something like "Take some time to get settled and go inside." As a "Thinker" type, I wasn't helped by this at all. There was a lot of "inside" in my head! I needed, and was greatly helped by, someone actually mentioning parts of my body one by one. After the periphery of my body (which I needed because sometimes I was so far away from sensing my body that all I could feel were my hands), I really appreciated hearing someone say "throat... chest... stomach..." Then I could feel in there. (See p. 242 in this volume for the text of a typical Leading In script as I might do it today.)

Not Clearing a Space

For the next stage, what we had been doing before was saying something like: “Ask yourself in there what’s in the way of feeling fine about your life.” This was a preliminary to Clearing a Space, and was a way to find life issues to set out or move.

I had to drop this fairly soon. People were coming to me willing to pay for one session, to find out if Focusing would help them, and if three quarters of the session was taken up with setting things out, people tended to wonder when we were ever going to get to the good stuff – and usually didn’t come back. A lot of people, myself included, simply didn’t need to do Clearing a Space. (Later I discovered other problems with it. See “Relationship = Distance + Connection” in this volume.)

I needed another way of starting, so I studied what experienced Focusers did at this stage if they didn’t Clear a Space. They seemed to sort of wait expectantly in the inner body space, open to sensing what wanted awareness. I put that into words: “So you might give yourself an inner invitation in there, like you’re saying, ‘What wants my awareness now?’ And wait.”

Something Comes

Gene Gendlin called his next step “Finding a Felt Sense.” My expectant waiting was my version of that. There was a variation if people wanted to use the session to work on a particular issue known in advance. I would say at this point: “So you might invite that whole thing (about _____) to sit down with you here, and invite your body to give you its whole sense about that.”

Describing

Traditionally, the next step is to Find a Handle. That was good. But I realized, for almost everyone, this “Handle” finding process was greatly helped if it started with a physical description. The benefit of finding a handle was greatest when it enabled the Focuser’s awareness to stay and deepen at the bodily level. Let me give some examples to show what I mean:

“I’m sensing something... I’m finding a handle... the handle is ‘rejection’... I don’t know why he rejected me like that!”

“I’m sensing something... I’m finding a handle... the handle is ‘tightness’... I’m staying with that sense of tightness... The tightness is like a pulling in... This is about the way he treated me... Something in me feels like protecting, not to be rejected again....”

The first example is what I would call leaving the Focusing type of contact, going into thoughts and interpretations. The second example shows a person staying in a Focusing type of contact. As I watched people doing the first kind of thing over and over again, I felt the need to offer a supportive type of guidance that would help them find and stay in Focusing contact. As I’ve said, this almost always involved finding first a body sensation description. (See “Body? What Body?” in this volume for the cases in which it didn’t.) The words “find a handle” didn’t enable this process to happen reliably. I stopped using the word “handle” because, as a new specialized term, it required too much thinking and remembering on the part of the Focuser.

Instead I said, “Maybe you could take some time to describe what you’re sensing there... what it feels like, even just at the physical level...”

Checking the Description

Gendlin spoke of Resonating the Handle, and I believe that this powerful and important move is central to the Focusing process: to let the symbolizing of what is felt continue to interact with the directly felt experience. I just needed to change the language so that people could do it easily, without too much explanation.

“So take that word ‘tightness’ back to your body and check if that’s right, if ‘tightness’ is the best word for what that feels like, or if another word fits even better.”

Staying in Contact

As I compared what experienced Focusers did with what I saw these new people doing, one thing that stood out for me was what I’ve been calling “staying with the process” vs. “leaving the process.” Experienced Focusers knew how to stay with what they were experiencing, with a quality of gentle interested curiosity. New people “popped out” into all kinds of other activities: speculation, analysis, rumination, argument, distraction...

I realized that one of the functions of finding a description for what was felt, and then checking the description, was to stay with the inner experience. If a person was finding a description and checking it, they weren't doing all those other things I've just listed.

Once they had a description, though, what then? "Just being with what was there" wasn't a step for Gendlin. He probably assumed it would go without saying. My new people needed it said. Since they weren't used to the notion that simply staying with something in awareness was a powerfully helpful thing to do, they "popped out" into other activities unless they had the support of a gentle invitation to stay.

I realized that I had to suggest, invite, or "guide" them to do what experienced Focusers did naturally, to stay with the process. Once they had "popped out," it was harder to take them back in, so I tried to anticipate (gently) the moments when they might pop out... and to give a guiding suggestion right then, before it happened.

I said to them, "See if it would be OK to just be with that." Or, "... just stay with that." Or, "...just keep that company." And I added: "...with interested curiosity."

The Inner Relationship

What I have said up till now has been the background, the foundation, for what happens next, the heart of Inner Relationship Focusing. This point in the session, when they had come into body contact, invited something, described it, checked the description, and were staying with it,

with interested curiosity... this was the point where some people had breakthroughs, and others became completely stuck.

Gendlin's step that I had learned to offer at this point, Asking, wasn't as helpful as I would have liked. As always, people who found Focusing easily also found Asking helpful. But those who didn't, those whose inner contact was tenuous and who easily popped out of the process, let asking inner questions take them on all kinds of wild rides.

"I'm asking it what it needs... It needs me to be strong and tell him what I think of him... It needs me to call up his wife and warn her that her husband is a jerk... It needs me to just forget about all these emotions and try to relax..."

It was clear to me, listening to these diatribes, that "What does it need?" didn't help. Without more assistance, people took questions like that right into their heads and said what they were thinking. Even the careful cushions I had been taught ("If your head answers, let the answer go, and ask again in your body") weren't as helpful as I wanted them to be – they told people what to do, but didn't really help them do it. How was an inexperienced person to know whether it was their "head" answering or not? And if asking didn't work the first time, why would asking again work better?

So again I watched experienced Focusers and asked myself to put into fresh words the essence of what they were doing at this stage. And what I frequently saw was people entering into a kind of empathy with the "it" that they were in contact with. They sounded like this:

“I’m sensing it here... It’s a tightness... It’s a pulling back... It’s like it doesn’t want any more hurt... I’m checking... that’s right.... it’s like it’s letting me know that it’s been hurt enough... there’s more... ah, yes, it’s been hurt enough and it also feels like it’s been betrayed... ‘betrayed’ is the word that fits... yes... [big sigh] ... that’s right.”

It was as if they had become empathic listeners to an inner “it” that had begun to have feelings and needs of its own. How to facilitate this for people who didn’t find it themselves?

I found the answer one day when I was sitting across from a man who had gotten to that stuck spot. He felt something in his body, he had described it and was sitting with it, and now what? Nothing more was happening. As I remembered experienced Focusers, and I reached for words to help him do what they did, I found myself saying, “Maybe you could sense how IT feels from ITS point of view.” That was it, that worked... for him, and for many others in the weeks that followed. I learned that although some people easily and naturally found the place of listening empathically to the inner “it,” others needed to be guided there. And this invitation to “sense how IT feels from ITS point of view” was extremely helpful. It facilitated inner empathy in a way that “How does it feel?” did not. Asked “How does it feel?” people told me how they felt. “It’s uncomfortable,” said a woman on one memorable occasion when I asked her how a tightness in her throat was feeling. “Oops,” I said to myself inside, and re-phrased my invitation to her: “Maybe you could sense how IT feels from ITS point of view.” She closed her eyes for a moment, opened them in astonishment, and reported, “Oh, IT feels scared!”

I realized that what I had been developing was a rather close type of guiding that didn’t allow people to stray too far from the Focusing path. Experienced Focusers didn’t need this kind of guiding, nor did some new people – reflective Listening took them right inside, and they did all the rest. But for the people who did need it, it seemed enormously helpful, as far as I could tell.

And when people wanted to learn how to do what I was doing – “guiding” – I began to find ways to teach that as well.

Although I based my guiding on the process of experienced Focusers, this close inner empathy wasn't the only type of process that experienced Focusers had. Others took leaps, for example from a wholistic awareness to a realization that the whole problem was really different from what they had thought. But this type of process was harder to facilitate for a new person. There were too many other things they might do.

An analogy: Imagine there is a little valley, and where you want to go is on the other side of the valley. People who know how to get there use two different ways. Some walk step by step down one side of the hill and up the other side. Others take a leap and find themselves on the other side. Your job is to take a new person to the other side of the valley. You could just take them to the top of the near bank and say, “Leap!” But there is fog; the other bank isn't visible. If they leap, they're far likelier to end up in the wrong place, and have to be brought back to try again. Maybe they'll be discouraged or ashamed at their wrong attempt, and after enough wrong leaps may even give up. Or you can choose to show them the step-by-step method. It isn't the only way to go, true, but it works more reliably – and once they know the other bank, leaping will be available to them too.

I was developing a way to take people into Focusing “on the ground,” so to speak. I could guide them in baby steps, and let each increment of deeper contact prepare them for the next one. If something I suggested didn't work, it was such a tiny addition from the previous step that it was fairly easy to see what hadn't worked, and backing up to try another angle was hardly a hiccup.

I realized that what distinguished what I was doing from the facilitation (“guiding”) that I was taught was a kind of “inner relationship” that was the touchstone all through the session. The Focuser’s “I” was being with an “it,” and it was the “it” which spoke, opened up, had feelings, and revealed its depths, held in the gentle containing presence of a “I” which was curious, interested, accepting, spacious, and non-judging.

“Inner relationship” was a perfect metaphor for this whole process, because we could talk about the qualities of that relationship – gentle, accepting, interested, etc. – and we could show how that relationship was enhanced and deepened at every stage, by describing, by “being with,” by sensing how it feels from its point of view, etc.

The Focuser, in the role of the “I,” was the ideal listener, just saying back to the “it” what it was saying. I could support this role with guiding suggestions like, “Let it know you hear it,” which also prevented the Focuser from sliding into other activities like arguing, interpreting, apologizing...

The Living “It”

What I saw as I observed closely was that, in many Focusing sessions that were satisfying for the Focuser and clearly in close contact with a deep process, the “it” that the Focuser was in contact with seemed to be alive, or to come alive in the course of the session. The Focuser said things like, “It wants...” or “It needs...” or “It says...” or “It doesn’t want...” In fact there was often a developmental process for the “it” (the felt sense) in the course of the session, in which at first it was rather simple and rather simply described, from an external point of view, and then, as it was empathically connected with and sensed as inwardly complex, it seemed to come

alive. I called this phenomenon “The Living ‘It,’” and of course I was interested in how to facilitate this coming alive which so often seemed to correlate with the Focuser being able to deeply hear what the felt sense needed to express.

In A Process Model, Gendlin writes of an “interaffecting process” in which “[The Focuser] interacts with some ‘feel’ even before it is quite there. She seeks it, looks for it, waits for it, lets it come, pursues and points to what has come... Interaction is usually (and as discussed so far) in relation to a person or a thing.... Now something like such interactions [is] occurring in a new space made by these activities...” (p. 219, italics in original). In terms of his Process Model, we cannot say that the felt sense is already alive, nor that the Focuser makes it alive. Rather, it is in the interaction that it becomes the kind of thing that can be alive. It is treated as alive, and thus it is alive... but not in a simply causative way.

Emotional Quality – “Its Mood” – and Situations

I discovered that for a Focuser who wasn’t already sensing this “Living It,” the most reliable way to bring it was to invite the Focuser to sense the emotion of the “it” as experienced at that moment. Emotion (the “I” empathically sensing “its” emotion) seemed to be the key that unlocked the door of deepening process.

An example: “I have a pressure in my chest... it gets stronger as I think about the project... something in me feels that project as a pressure... I’m acknowledging it... I’m sitting with it... I’m sensing how that pressure feels from its point of view... it’s resentful... oh, I see... it’s resentful that it doesn’t get to follow its own timing... I’m letting it know I hear that... Ah, it’s relaxing quite a lot...”

Another example: “There’s a tightness in my chest... I’m acknowledging it... I’m sensing if ‘tightness’ is the right word... it’s like there’s a belt tied around my chest... I’m sitting with it... I’m sensing for its emotion... the belt is scared... I’m letting it know I can sense how scared it is... it’s scared that something is going to get loose, go wild... I’m acknowledging that... yes, it’s loosening a bit as it feels understood...”

(Notice, by the way, how easily this process can go wrong without the awareness that this “belt” is potentially alive. “I want to untie the belt” is common, but unfortunately totally unhelpful, since it is identification with another part rather than Presence with this one.)

In A Process Model, Gendlin defines a “situation” as something that can only be experienced by a human. Animals have “behavior contexts,” but only humans, who live in a symboling world, have the external facts along with the internal meaning. (This is not meant to be interpreted as humans being “better” than animals, but simply to explain differences in how we process our lives.)

“People live and act in situations.... Situations are not the physically external facts, but the context of interactions with others, which also determines how these facts are defined. (A locked door is one thing if I am hiding from someone; if trying to get out, quite something else.)” p. 168.

When I read this recently, I realized something about why it can be so facilitative for a Focuser to sense its point of view, its mood. Point of view in this situational sense is something that a human can have, and inviting a sense of point of view is enlivening into the complexity of a

human perspective. In the outer world, belts don't have moods. In the inner world, they do, or can... and do when treated as if they can.

Later Developments of Inner Relationship Focusing

Begun as a reliable way to show (most) people how to find Focusing, Inner Relationship work has developed further. I began to teach my “on-the-ground” guiding method to advanced students, and the handouts for these workshops became my Guiding Manual in 1990.

The concept of “disidentification” developed out of an understanding that people needed to be with what they were feeling, and couldn't do that if they were identified with the feeling. I coined the term “ittification” to refer to the process of forming a felt experience into an “it” that could be given company.

In 1992, I began to give workshops in “The Inner Relationship” to groups of Focusing people in Germany, the UK, Japan, and elsewhere. Recognizing what I was doing as something she too had already begun to work with, Barbara McGavin joined me in the development of IR Focusing, and we began to teach together.

Because the “I-it” relationship was so crucial to our work, IR Focusing led us to working with “parts” in a more specific and explicit way than Gendlin did in his six-step way of teaching Focusing – although as these two quotes from my favorite Gendlin paper show, he is no stranger to this perspective.

“Focusing is this very deliberate thing where an ‘I’ is attending to an ‘it.’” (“The Small Steps...”, p. 222.)

“The client and I, we are going to keep it, in there, company. As you would keep a scared child company. You would not push on it, or argue with it, or pick it up... If you will go there with your awareness and stay there or return there, that is all it needs; it will do all the rest for you” (p. 216).

The work with parts blossomed in 1994 as both Barbara and I realized that working with the difficult areas of our own lives required a conception of some parts being out of awareness – “exiled.” The part that wanted to drink in an addiction to alcohol, the part that wanted to feel bad in depression, the part that didn’t want to write in writer’s block... these were clearly in dynamic tension with other parts, a tension so fierce it could even be called a war. In the midst of the impasse of these painful issues, we were identified with one part and dissociated from the other, yet both operated powerfully in us. Often the exiles, despite being out of awareness, seemed to have the most power!

Faced with this inner war, the importance of finding an “I” that was neither one side nor the other increased, and in 1998 we began calling this “Presence.” Although Presence was first presented in a Treasure Maps to the Soul workshop, Barbara and I now teach it in our Path to Lasting Change, Part One workshops. Clearly, Treasure Maps to the Soul and Inner Relationship Focusing have been developing together, and are not sharply distinct.

Another development has been the method of inviting empathy for its “not wanting” and “wanting,” which carries further the enlivening empathy of sensing its emotion. Again, this was developed first as part of Treasure Maps, and is now something we use in all our teaching. (See “Radical Gentleness” in this volume for an application of this method.)

A Subset of Focusing

There are many ways to do Focusing. Inner Relationship is only one way. And it isn't the best way for everyone. To go back to our analogy of crossing the little valley – some people need to leap, it doesn't work for them to go step by step. In developing a method that I could reliably use for most people, to give them successful Focusing experiences and avoid the negative consequences of going down unsuccessful avenues, I had to accept that I was doing something some people would not be helped by.

Not every successful Focusing session has a “Living It,” nor does starting with being led into body awareness help everyone find Focusing. (See “Body? What Body?”) For experienced Focusers there are many ways to do Focusing, but if we let new people play in that big a field, there are too many “wrong” things they may do – and pulling them back from those things sets up a negative set, where they feel like they are being told “no” too often. From a teaching perspective, it's more desirable if we can offer success, and keep saying “yes.” That's what Inner Relationship Focusing is meant to do. But if anyone has trouble doing it, there is good news: Focusing is even bigger, and there are other possibilities.